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BALLAD-SINGING IN NOVA SCOTIA

BY W. ROY MACKENZIE

[Mr. Mackenzie has noted down the following facts and observations at my request. They are not only interesting in themselves, but they make up an important document as to ballad tradition in general. The conditions in Nova Scotia have been such as to render the evidence which he has collected highly typical. Several processes which we are often obliged to infer or to conjecture with respect to the course of tradition through long periods of time, have there gone on with such rapidity that their history may be followed by means of the recollection of living persons. No student of the popular ballad can fail to see the large significance of Mr. Mackenzie's notes. — G. L. KITTREDGE.]

THE north-shore counties of Nova Scotia have been, until recently, a peculiarly rich field for the ballad-seeker. Unfortunately, most of my seeking has been done recently, but, even so, I have found a few old men and women who still sing the ballads that were current in their youth, and who, in their attitude of mind as well as in their accurate memories of the old days, still represent the traditions of an elder time.

Summer before last I ran across a Mr. Henderson who, by his own account and by that of his neighbors, had been a famous ballad-singer in his day. Though he has been living now for several years in Tata-magouche, Colchester County, he was brought up in the West River district, Pictou County, which was settled, during the latter half of the eighteenth century, by Highland and Lowland Scotch. He is now over eighty years old, and during his youth ballad-singing was a well-known and recognized form of entertainment throughout the country districts of Pictou County.

One day, when Mr. Henderson was vainly attempting to recall the words of a song which had been popular in his youth, he apologized to me for his present lack of memory, and, as an offset, explained that he had once had a better memory for ballads than any other man in the West River district. To prove this he went on to describe a signal victory which he had once gained in a big ballad contest.

Pictou town is placed on the seacoast almost directly opposite Charlottetown, the capital of Prince Edward Island, and, "in the old days," practically all the travelling between the two provinces was by way of Pictou. One winter, when Mr. Henderson was a young man and was still living at the West River, he drove to Pictou to take the boat for Charlottetown. A storm came up which made it impossible for the boat to leave at the regular time, so Mr. Henderson spent the night at an inn along with several other people who had driven in from the country on the same errand. After supper the company gathered in the big living-room, and one of them proposed a ballad-contest, or "sing-ing-match." (The word "ballad" was apparently very seldom used.)

This was to last all night if necessary, and if it did, so much the better. Every one assented eagerly and the contest began, one singer "matching" another until long after midnight, when all were "sung out" except Mr. Henderson and another man whose name he did not know. The unknown held out for some time longer, but finally had to admit that he was beaten, whereupon Mr. Henderson exclaimed, with a fine assumption of surprise and disappointment, "What, man? Don't say ye're through already! I hae fifty more on the tip o' me tongue."

This is the story as I received it — though in less picturesque language — and the old man during the narration showed a fire of enthusiasm which made it quite clear to me that the supremacy thus gained was one not to be lightly esteemed. Indeed, I have more than once, in my conversations with old men and women throughout Pictou and Colchester, been assured that the man who, forty or fifty years ago, had the biggest stock of "old songs" in his district was to be regarded with a good deal of veneration.

The West River district, which I have mentioned several times, is one of the Scotch settlements that were opened up during the latter half of the eighteenth century.¹ To this district Mr. Henderson's parents came about 1820. According to his account, they brought from Scotland a collection of broadsides which they prized very highly, and were in constant receipt of newly-printed broadsides from the old country. Also, they "kept the office" at the West River (which meant simply that the mails were brought to their house for distribution), and Mr. Henderson remembers that ballad sheets were continually arriving from Scotland, for people throughout the district, and that they were always hailed with joy. I am taking West River as the typical Scotch settlement, which it was; so it may be seen that, what with the ballads brought out in the memories of the emigrants and in broadside form — which were continually added to by newly-printed broadsides from Scotland — the north-shore settlers of Nova Scotia, during the early years of the nineteenth century, were fairly familiar with ballad-music.

It will seem strange, then, when I go on to say that one may now travel these districts from side to side and find scarcely a man or woman of Scotch blood who has even a speaking acquaintance with the ballad. The usual reason given is, of course, that ballad-singing as an active form of entertainment has been shamed out of existence by more up-to-date music and forms of amusement. For my particular field, how-

¹ The historical events mentioned in this sketch are treated more specifically by the Rev. George Patterson, D. D., in his *History of the County of Pictou*, Montreal, 1877. In my treatment of the French element in the population, I have not agreed entirely with Dr. Patterson's account; but the French settlements belong mainly to the neighboring county of Colchester and to the extreme western part of Pictou County, and therefore are not treated with special care in the work mentioned. For the history of the Scotch settlements in the eastern part of Pictou County Dr. Patterson's work is authoritative.

ever, this explanation is not enough. I have visited many sections which have not yet been changed by the uplifting influence of modern songs and latter-day amusements, and even here the most cheering answer I could receive, except in rare instances, would be, "Ach, yes! Me feyther knowed some o' yon songs, but he never sung them unless he was feelin' guid." Now, this state of "feelin' guid" is very far removed from the Scotchman's ideal state of ethical goodness. The phrase, in fact, savors unmistakably of alcohol, and is about the strongest one employed by these people to denote a state of boisterous hilarity, a very rare condition with the self-respecting Scot.

In short, the explanation that I have been leading up to is, that the fanatical religious feeling of the Scotch ¹ is largely responsible for the decay of ballad-singing among them. The first settlers who came out, during the last part of the eighteenth century and the first of the nineteenth, were not deeply religious: on the contrary, they were for the most part — and this applies especially to the Highlanders — an active, roystering class of men, who cheerfully travelled miles to congregate for an evening's revelry, and drank gallons of Jamaica rum at a barn-raising. Later on, when preaching became the regular thing throughout the country districts, they became as a class fanatically religious, and the ballads, now regarded as profane and immoral, gave place to the Psalms of David. William MacKay, a resident of Lime Rock, Pictou County, told me that his father, though possessed of a long list of ballads which he had learned in his youth, would neither sing them himself nor allow them to be sung in his house, and, furthermore, had warned his children against polluting their mouths with such profane music. Of course no district was entirely free from unregenerate Scots, who, when they combined a distaste for religion with a taste for music, still kept alive a few of the old songs.

What I have just said applies mainly to the purely Scotch districts, set back from the seacoast. In the settlements directly on the coast the history of the ballad is somewhat different, and is affected by an influence that I have not mentioned before, namely, that of the French-Swiss emigrants who came to Nova Scotia some few years after the first Scotch settlements were made. These were formerly French Huguenots who went from their own land to Switzerland, and afterwards migrated to Nova Scotia, taking up land along the north shore near the settlements made by the Scotch. A few years later we find communities, along the coast, of Scotch and French-Swiss together. The latter usually refer to themselves as Swiss, so I adopt the rather clumsy term, French-Swiss, by way of compromise. The language they spoke was a dialect of French. They are notably a music-loving people, and in a

¹ It must be understood that when I use the word "Scotch," I apply it only to the descendants of Scotch settlers in Nova Scotia.

great many cases they acquired ballads from their Scotch neighbors, and retained them, while the Scotch abandoned them altogether.

Of course this did not all happen on a summer's day. The French-Swiss had their own language, which was not English, and it was reserved for their children, who acquired the English language, and dropped their own, to set in motion the shifting process that I have mentioned. This race has always been socially inferior to the Scotch element, and it was as servants in the houses and on the farms of the latter that the second generation of the French-Swiss learned many of the ballads which were in vogue with their masters. An old man of this nationality, Edward, or rather "Old Ned" Langille, of River John, Pictou County, told me that his father — who was a son of one of the first settlers — had been a famous ballad-singer, and had learned most of his songs while in the employ of a Scotch family. Old Ned himself retained many of these ballads, and was always very eager to sing them up to the day of his death, which came two summers ago, and was apparently hastened by a resolution which I had made in the spring to get his entire stock of ballads during the summer. He had followed the example of his father in shunning the alphabet, so that the ballads, in this case, were purely a matter of oral tradition. Some few ballads well worth the saving have, I fear, gone down to the grave with him.

In these mixed settlements, then, there is an additional reason why ballad-singing was dropped by the Scotch. The French-Swiss learned the ballads so eagerly and sang them so often that they soon had a monopoly of this kind of music, since the Scotch began to regard as beneath their dignity a form of amusement regularly practised by their servants.

Of course one cannot discuss the decline of ballad-singing in any district without taking into account the influence which I mentioned at the beginning of my sketch, that is, the influx of up-to-date songs and of up-to-date amusements in general. I have a very good illustration of this influence in the case of Mr. Henderson himself, who, without despising the ballad either from a religious or a social point of view, has nevertheless allowed his ancient store of ballads to slip gradually away from him. He moved from the West River to Tatamagouche when he was between forty and fifty years old, and since that time has taken a fairly prominent part in the village life at Tatamagouche. Possessed of a good voice and a fondness for performing at the little social entertainments and local concerts of the village, he soon outgrew such an antiquated practice as ballad-singing, and the few ballads that he can still sing he has retained almost by accident. "The Blae-berry Courtship," for instance, a rather long ballad which I got from him last summer, he remembered, as he told me, because an old friend of his — a woman living at the West River — had been very fond of

it, and had always asked him to sing it for her on his visits to his old home.

Living a mile or so outside of Tatamagouche is an old man of French-Swiss descent, Robert Langille, who has been a ballad-singer all his life. Last summer, though he was eighty-six years old, he still sang with unabated energy, and remembered perfectly many of the old songs which had been current in his neighborhood when he was a boy, and which he had had special opportunities of learning, since he was one of the old race of cobblers who went from house to house to do their work. He has taken no active part in the life of the community, and has lived now for years in a quiet spot outside the village with his two sisters. To these three old people ballad-singing is still a live form of entertainment, and "Old Bob" has always had the most appreciative kind of audience in his own household. Here, then, living within two miles of each other, we have two types that are specially interesting in the present history of the ballad, — the singer who has outgrown the ballad, and the singer to whom the old songs are forever young.

But the broadsides, where are they? I have asked this question so often that it looks back at me now from the sheet like an old friend. Mr. Henderson must again adorn my tale. In his home there was an unusual collection of broadsides, but to-day he cannot account for one of them, nor does he regret the fact. Indeed, why should he? I have said that these broadsides were greatly prized by the Henderson family, but that was in the days when it meant something to know more ballads than your neighbor. The housemaids were finding a real and practical use for the Percy Manuscript when it was taken from them, and the old ballad-sheets were in at least as convenient a form for household use as the Percy Manuscript.

CAMBRIDGE, MASS.